



Clash of Ideas and Sensibility in the Writings of Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe



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Abstract

The topic of this case study is Clash of ideas and sensibility in writings of Joseph Conrad and Chinua Achebe. I have portrayed how both the authors have represented Africa in their writings. Joseph Conrad is a European whereas Chinua Achebe is an African. Both of them have contrary views about the people of Africa and Africa as a country. Both show some of the effects that the white colonists had in the area, and the influence they had on the natives. In *Heart of Darkness*, we see the influence of Kurtz over the natives at the Inner Station, where they revered him almost as a god. At the other stations, we also see the natives being affected by the white colonists, changing their ways of living around the station, and following what the white men's command, for the most part. In *Things Fall Apart*, we see this in Okonkwo's home village, where the white colonists set up a District Commissioner (D.C), and the natives bend to the laws he sets, even helping him enforce them. This completely changes their previous way of life.

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1. Introduction

African Literature is a literature that reacts against the post-colonial setup. It talks about the African identity without colonial effect and after colonization. Africa is the second largest continent in the world. African culture is a combination of various tribes, cultures, rituals, languages, food etc.

Colonialism can be defined as the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with the expansion of Europe over the last 400 years. Around the 1870s and 1900s Africa faced colonialism that can be categorized in two i.e Classical Antiquity and European Colonialism. Slavery has existed since a very long time but it was prevalent in certain areas like Africa and the Caribbean. The 'Negro slave system' lasted for a very long duration

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of about 300 years. It was called as commercial slavery. They were exploited and forced to labor and were pushed into prostitution. They were used as objects by the dominating clan.

In 1899, Joseph Conrad wrote the novella *Heart of Darkness*. It is a journey of a man called Marlowe who shares his experience about his spiritual journey but the representation of Africa is very Eurocentric. It represents an Africa without Africans. He refers to it as a prehistoric earth. It seems as if there are no emotions connected to the Africans. "They were dying slowly- it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying profusely in the greenish gloom".

In 1958, Chinua Achebe the African novelist wrote *Things Fall Apart* representing the tradition and culture of the Igbo Society. The title of the novel is taken from W. B. Yeats' poetry *The Second Coming* "things fall apart, the center cannot hold". It is about the life of an African character named Okonkwo through whom the image of Africa is shown. According to his representation, the African culture is very rich. He has broken the tradition of the oral literature that prevailed in Africa and wrote many novels. He was against Europeans to represent Africa as a pagan and non-existing place.

Actually, the Europeans are taught from their childhood that the Africans or the blacks are uncivilized and underdeveloped. They think that it is their duty to civilize the inferior clan. From the beginning, Europeans have this mindset for them. Due to Colonialism and slavery, the country has lagged behind. Achebe found the representation of Africa and its people to be inappropriate so he wrote the essay "An Image of Africa" as a reply to Conrad's novel. He has accused Conrad of being Stereotypical towards Africa and its People. In his essay he has cited *Heart of Darkness*, it notes how Africa is used by West to establish his own supremacy as a developed and civilized culture against the Dark Continent Africa.

2. Research Methods

Research means Systematic investigative process employed to increase or revise current knowledge by discovering new facts. For writing this paper I have gone through several books, essays, and articles. I have read about the culture and background of Africa and African Literature so as to write and understand the topic better. As the paper is focused on the clashes of ideas and sensibility between Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad I have compared their views towards Africa and the people of Africa and also their writing style.

3. Results and Analysis

Joseph Conrad was a Eurocentric writer. He has many novels and short stories to his credit, which are also adapted as movies. His writings have a reflection of the European-dominated world including colonialism and imperialism. He started his career as a seaman which became a reason for the coastal setting in his novels. Some of his works are *Almayer's Folly* which was his first novel, *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896), *The Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Chinua Achebe was a Nigeria-born writer, critic and also a professor. His most notable work was his novel *Things Fall Apart* which was published in 1958. Apart from this, he wrote *No Longer At Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of Savannah* and poetry. He wrote his novels in the English language as a tool to defend his country and culture. He wanted people, specifically the likes of Conrad, to know the rich and existing culture of Africa and change the stereotypical image that they had in their minds. He wrote the famous essay 'An Image of Africa' accusing Joseph Conrad to have shown Africa as the Third world.

Joseph Conrad had written *Heart of Darkness* in 1899. His representation can be seen as an Orientalized view of Africa. The title holds the word 'darkness' which in his terms symbolizes unearthly, savage, mystical, exotic, horrific, inhuman and wild place. It may also symbolize the darkness that is deep down in his soul. Africa is said to be the 'core of darkness'. The representation of Africa is shown through the journey of his narrator Marlow and a shadowy narrator. They may be considered as the archetypes of the European mindset. Marlow, the second narrator calls his journey to Africa as 'journey to the hell'. There are many other characteristics in the novel – Mistah Kurtz, The Manager, The Brick Maker, The Aunt, The Doctor etc. All of these characters are Europeans, the Africans are acknowledged as blacks or natives. Their characters are not individually defined in the novel. They are not considered to be humans by the Western people. Their voices are compared to noises. He has regarded his community to be a civilized and the Africans to be underdeveloped. He has shown how the whites have gone to Africa in order to bring light into darkness. They consider it to be their duty to civilize the savage creatures. Instead of representing Africans to be human, he says that the behavior of white men was worst that the cannibalism of the Africans. They are said to be unnaturally savage, it implies that Conrad considers Africans to

be born savage. He has used different symbols and images that are contrasting and can be taken to compare Africa and Europe. The symbol of Light and dark is used throughout the story. Light symbolizes Europeans and civilization whereas dark is shown as a symbol for Africans and savagery. The word 'evil' in the novel can be considered as representing the environment of Africa which according to Europeans is unearthly. The mention of the two rivers Thames and Congo might be intentional. Thames is compared to the primitive Congo river that is not even considered to be a river same as the two countries. He has also shown slavery and the brutal behavior of Europeans towards them.

Chinua Achebe had written *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. He was a native African. His representation of Africa is entirely different from Conrad. He has depicted the culture of Africa through the life and experiences of the protagonist Okonkwo. He belonged to village Umuofia which followed the Igbo culture, Achebe himself belonged to the Igbo society. He describes the customs of the Igbo tribe in detail- the wrestling match, wedding rituals, harvest feast and the settling of disputes. Unlike Conrad's representation Achebe's Africa has its own existence and identity. There are many characters- Okonkwo, Obeirika, Ikemefuna, Ezinma, Ekwefi, Nwoye, Mr. Brown, The District Commissioner, Mr. Kiaga etc. He has developed characters of both Africans and the missionaries. According to him, as he belonged to Africa he has shown authentic African culture. A reading of the novel briefs about all the rituals that the Igbo people followed on different occasions. He has used many native words like Chi, Osu, Chikwu, Ekwugwu, Ani etc. to define his culture in a more descriptive manner. In regular days Yams, Palm wine, and fish are their common food but on occasions, they have Kola nuts, Yam foo foo and vegetable soup was the chief food in their celebrations. There is no doubt in the fact that they have culture and rituals but also includes many superstitions and immoral activities.

Things Fall Apart shows Phases of Africa before and after colonialization. The arrival and settlement of missionaries brought many changes in the village and lives of the people. They live in a misconception about the forest that they considered evil but turned out to be a foundation for the colonizers in their villages. Many people were influenced and attracted by the missionaries and joined them. They got themselves converted into Christians. The unity that they had before was broken and they became enemies with their own people. When Okonkwo comes back from exile to Umuofia he gets disappointed when he notices the changes that took place in these seven years.

Chinua Achebe was against Joseph Conrad's portrayal of Africa and the Africans in his novel *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad has shown Africans to be pagan, savage and a group of Cannibals. He has treated Africa as the 'other' or the planet of inhuman people. In 1977, Achebe wrote an essay called 'An Image of Africa- Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' as a reply to *Heart of Darkness*. He has accused Conrad of being Stereotypical towards Africa and its People. In his essay he has cited *Heart of Darkness*, it notes how Africa is used by West to establish his own supremacy as a developed and civilized culture against the Dark Continent Africa.

He begins his essay through one of his experiences when he was a teaching African Literature in New York. He came across a student who wrote to him that he enjoyed reading *Things Fall Apart* and he was "happy to learn about customs and superstitions in African Tribes"(Achebe, 1). According to the Europeans Africa is a 'place of negations'. They never look towards it from a positive mindset. Europeans are themselves unaware about their own superstitions and rituals. Each and every section of society has their own culture and practices which include superstitions and odd customs.

Heart of Darkness fulfills the western desire and need. His perspective is that of a European. It is a widely read and prescribed novel in their countries. It is considered to be a great contribution to English Literature. It is taught and critiqued by the critics. One of the critics has said it to be "among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language" (Achebe, 2). Achebe says that Conrad has mocked the skills and intellect of the Africans.

Achebe in his essay has done an in-depth analysis of Conrad's novel. He has observed that Conrad has used two rivers in his novel i.e. Thames and River Congo which are obverse of each other. Thames on one hand is placid and calm while river Congo is not even considered as a river. Same as he has taken Africa to be old, non-existent, dirty and Savage and compared Europeans with Thames i.e. calm, clean and existing. He says that Conrad said, "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world"(Conrad, 53). He has also called beginnings to be frenzy which is a term he uses for African atmosphere.

He criticizes Conrad to have used two words for the African atmosphere i.e. Frenzy and silence. He has used them in a way that they may seem ritualistic but actually used for mocking Africa. They are not positively used by him. He wants to show Africans to be insane and inhuman. Achebe says "Of course there is a judicious change of adjective from time to time, so that instead of inscrutable, for example, you might have unspeakable, even

plain mysterious, etc., etc.”. He says in his essay that F.R. Leavis said that “adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery”. Conrad has used bombastic words and trickery to avoid getting into any controversy not for ornamenting his novel. He has actually portrayed Africa in an “ugly” way.

He then mentions about how he has shown the Africans to be “burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage”, “We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse”(Conrad, 56). Rather considering them as a human he always refers to them as “black”. The way he describes each and every part of their bodies’ including their facial expressions shows that he looks towards them, not as humans but unknown creatures. He refers to the Europeans as “sane men” whereas the “blacks” as “a madhouse”. He calls the soil of Africa as unearthly and the people inhuman and monstrous. He has in one way compared it to hell. “The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to looking upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there -- there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were... No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it -- this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you, was just the thought of their humanity -- like yours -- the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar”(Conrad, 57). Here Conrad wants to say that these people are unaware that they are inhuman and they will understand this with time. The use of the words ‘howled’, ‘leaped’ and ‘spun’ seems like he is describing the activities of an animal. He, again and again, uses the word “remote” to refer to their areas as rural and full of filth. He says that he is aware that Conrad is a romantic, he might not like “savages clapping their hands” but he has no right to call them inhuman.

He not only limits his criticism referring to them as black, savage or inhuman but also calls them cannibals or man-eaters. “Fine fellows -- cannibals --in their place”. He says that when he looks at the creatures from a distance, only the white portion of their eyeballs are visible and their faces are covered with “grotesque masks” or malformed faces. Achebe also says that he ended his novel on a comparative note between the mistress and the fiancée of Mistah Kurtz. A black woman was Kurtz’s mistress. “She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent ...She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose” (Conrad, 93). He will never resist calling them to be Savage every time he refers to the “black” people. The farthest he can refer to them is “kinship”. He then mentions about his fiancée. “She came forward all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning “He is sympathetic to the “white” fiancée of Mr. Kurtz. He uses “black” as a color related to mourning and for the Africans as well.

Chinua Achebe also comments upon the writing style of Conrad. First of all the usage of heavy language in order to be on a safe side. It seems that he has used Marlowe to give his own views about the Africans. There is “narrator behind a narrator”. The narrator primarily is Marlow but he makes us count his presence through another narrator that is not clearly specified. Marlow is a representative figure of the people of Europe. Their image of them is same as Marlow’s image is.

He says that Heart of Darkness cannot be said considered as a great work. It might be a great work for the Europeans as they can connect with Conrad. They have the same stereotypical image. He mockingly says that Conrad is “safely dead” but his book is still plaguing him. It is an offensive and deplorable novel. It questions the identity and humanity of the Africans.

4. Conclusion

It is seen that Conrad and Achebe’s representation of Africa in both the texts is very contrary. Things Fall Apart can be considered as an antithesis to Heart of Darkness. These two texts show the difference in ideas and sensibility between the two writers. Conrad writes from a Eurocentric view whereas Achebe writes as an African. According to Europeans the native culture does not exist. The Africans are primitive and pagan in nature. They have an Orthodox thinking and culture. Their gods and rituals that they follow are false. They don’t have a proper education system. Whereas as the African reality claims they have a well-established culture. They welcome new ideas and sensibility. There is a blend of tradition with modernity. Their gods stand parallel to the European gods. They claim that proper education system does not always mean English medium education only.

Achebe found the representation of Africa and the people inappropriate so he wrote the essay “An Image of Africa” as a reply to his novel. Conrad might not have written the novel particularly to criticize the Africans but used it as a backdrop to create the atmosphere. The main purpose might be to show his spiritual journey. The only

fault of Conrad was that to show the darkness in his inner conscience he used Africa as a symbol. Basically, both of them have an entirely different perspective regarding Africa.


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Biography of Author

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